

[We Follow the Sea]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: "WE FOLLOW THE SEA."

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Name of Person interviewed Mrs. Thelma Wingate (white)

Fictitious name Teckla Adams

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Place Charleston, S.C.

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“ We Follow The Sea.”

Almost everybody calls her Teckla, although she has been married, divorced, and is the mother of two blue-eyed youngsters, Leila, aged seven and Buddie, six.

Teckla Adams at thirty-two is one of those lively, happy-go-lucky persons always spoken of as a girl, long after girlhood has been left behind. She is affectionately known to her co-workers as “String Bean, “Tall Drink of Water,” “Spoon,” and many other names suggested by her long, lean lankness.

Teasing never makes her mad, however, and she looks up from her desk with a friendly smile in reply to any name one calls her, and is always ready to perform the many favors people continually ask of her, though it means staying over time to catch up with her own unfinished work.

“All my people follow the sea,” says Teckla. “[Pop?] is a sail maker by trade. But when steam took the place of sails, the sail business was knocked to pieces, and Pop went to work for the government as a lighthouse keeper.

“I remember to this day how scared I was when storms would hit our little island and cover it with water. The waves would be mountain high, and I'd think every one was going to wash us into the sea. C10 - 1/31/41 - S.C.

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I'd glue my nose to the window, and duck when I saw a big one coming,” she laughed.

Teckla remembers climbing with her baby feet the many twisting stairs to watch her father light the kerosene lamp in the tower at sundown. Of the three men assigned to the

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lighthouse, one must be always on duty to see that the light was properly trimmed and burning, so that ships might not miss its guiding gleam.

“Pop was born in Norway,” says Teckla, “and when we were kids we loved to hear him tell of how he used to go to sea on the sailing vessels that put out from the Norway ports.

“He didn't get much education, because he had to hustle for himself when he was just a little kid, but he knows lots more than plenty of people who've been to college, because he's been everywhere and seen everything for himself.”

“Teckla says,” Pop's done lots of interesting things in his life.” In the Spanish-American War he was a diver and often engaged in the hazardous task of destroying enemy mine fields.

“When Pop gave up his lighthouse job to go to sea again,” Teckla continued,” we moved back to Old Town. C10 - 1/31/41 - S.C.

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Mama's father was a life-saver at the lighthouse station just across the bay. He and Grandma Erickson came over here from Sweden before Mama was born, so Mama's lived right in this section all her life. She finished at the same high school I did.

“I remember Grandma Erickson used to make us children all sorts of Swedish dishes when we were little. I liked prute best of all. That's a pudding made with prunes, cornstarch, and cinnamon stick, with cream or milk poured over it. At Christmas she always made sweet soup for dinner-I forget what she used to call that - and did I love fishing out the prunes and raisins! We've never had that since Grandma died,” she sighed regretfully. “I don't know why. But we still have smelts and Swedish rye bread for supper every Saturday night. The bread is imported from the Old Country, and is about six inches across. Smelts are little fish pickled with onions, you know. We buy them by the keg, but everybody likes them so much that we can hardly any in the house.

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"Another thing Grandma used to make for us was forecore. That's a boiled dish made of alternate layers of cabbage and meat. We still have that a lot because the children like it."

Today big blond Captain Neilson runs a string of freight boats, hauling vegetables from the sea-islands where 4 they are grown, to the city, for shipment to the northern markets.

"It's fine having fresh vegetables for the table all the times," says Teckla. "They certainly help to fill the kids up. Pop brings in fresh eggs and chickens from the country, too."

Teckla finished high school, taking the commercial course. After graduation she went to work as cashier in a dairy, earning fifteen dollars a week.

Quick at figures, she liked the work, and was at once on friendly terms with the young farmers who dropped in at the dairy to market their eggs, butter and milk. Soon she was receiving invitations to parties, dances, and oyster roasts out on the neighboring plantations.

When Teckla fell in love with Ted Adams, her family opposed the match from the start.

"He just wasn't in our class," said her sister, Freida, discussing the marriage.

Ted was working in a grocery store at a salary of twenty dollars a week when he and Teckla became engaged. On Saturday nights he worked until almost twelve, and so at midnight one Saturday the two were married, and went away for a short wedding trip to the mountains of North Carolina.

Ted had a stepmother whom he adored, and when they returned from the honeymoon, they went to live with her.

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But Teckla took one of her rare dislikes to Mrs. Adams, and Mrs. Adams returned the feeling with interest, so that from the first the young couple led an unhappy home life,

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punctuated by frequent sharp quarrels. Teckla blames Mrs. Adams for these bitter disputes which were constantly upsetting the routine of family life.

She says that if she dared go out without first telling her mother-in-law exactly where she was going; what she planned to do; and how long she intended to stay; that the old lady would telephone Ted and make a big mystery of her going off alone, concluding with some such statement;

“Had I better phone around a little and see if I can find out where she is?”

At last matters came to a head in a final family row. Teckla walked out, rented a small flat, and bought some furniture on the installment plan. She was much happier now, and they seldom quarreled any more, except on those occasions when Ted gave expression to his ever present desire to return to his step-mother's home.

At the end of a year or two Teckla's careful management had enabled them to lay-aside enough to start a small grocery business for themselves. Soon after they opened the shop, little Leila was born, and a year later, Buddie.

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Teckla laughingly says that “They had bets up on Palmetto Row when Leila was born, whether I'd live or die. I've got a bad heart, and I'm not so terribly strong anyway. I ran a big risk to have those kids, but I wanted children and I'm glad I took the chance.”

Teckla found life very full in those early days of her marriage, Marketing, cooking, sweeping, sewing and baby-tending kept her busy constantly, but she never complained of missing the fun she had been accustomed to in girlhood-the fun so neccessary to a person of her pleasure-loving disposition, or of doing without the finery that she craved.

Then Ted started staying out late at nights. When he came in, often long after midnight, Teckla could smell whiskey on his breath. While she did not object to him taking a drink

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or two with the boys, she did object to him being brought home intoxicated in the early morning hours. Soon they began to have bitter quarrels again.

At last one night Ted was arrested, charged with being “drunk and disorderly.” Teckla went up to the station house and paid his fine, but told him the next morning:

“If this ever happens again, Ted Adams, I’m through. I’ve stood a lot from you, but I’m not going to let my children have a jailbord for a father.”

* Broad Street.

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“We Follow the Sea.”

After that he behaved himself for several months. Then one night Mrs. Adams telephoned that Ted was at the station house, and wanted Teckla to come to pay his bond. When Teckla refused, Mrs. Adams was furious:

“Are you going to let that poor boy stay all night in a cell?” she demanded.

“He can stay there forever,” said Teckla, and hung up the receiver.

Next day she packed her things, took her babies, and went home to her parents. She has been with them ever since.

Teckla smilingly says that the children are “Pop’s eye-balls,” and that if it had not been for them, she doubts if he would have taken her in again, for he was very angry when she married against his wishes.

But while Captain Nielson was glad to have his daughter and her children come home to live, he believed that all members of the family should bear their share of expenses, so Teckla soon went to work again, leaving the children in her mother’s care. A little colored

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girl was hired for a dollar a week to wash out their clothes, and take them to play in the park. As the Emergency Relief Program was just being set up at this time, Teckla was assigned to its clerical staff at fifteen dollars a week.

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But she had not realized how the long strain of trying to keep the family peaceful, and making ends meet on the small amount of money she had been able to beg from Ted after he began drinking and neglecting his business, had told on her health. Soon she was taken very ill. "Rheumatic fever," was the doctor's diagnosis. It was over two months before she was well enough to return to work.

Teckla never does things by halves. The same winter in which she left Ted, she went to Georgia, and there filed petition for divorce, as it is impossible to secure one in South Carolina. Ted has long since re-married, and has never contributed a penny towards the support of either his children, or his former wife.

But through all her troubles, Teckla's sense of humor has never deserted her. When the children [asked?] where their daddy was she told them gravely:

"The angels took your daddy to Heaven."

One day the boy came home, very much excited:

"Mommy," he cried," you said the angels had taken Daddy to Heaven, but we saw his walking in the park with a crippled lady."

"They brought him back," said Teckla.

Today Teckla holds a stenographic position on the administrative staff of the Women's Division of the WPA earning eighty dollars a month.

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Her work brings her in contact with many persons seeking relief, and her friendly manner and sympathetic attitude toward their problems have made her a favorite with both clients and department heads.

The family is very proud of Teckla and likes to talk about the important work she does, and of how popular she is. Often when she comes home at six, tired out from a long day, she finds one or two tearful ladies in the parlor, waiting to tell her their troubles, or to ask her advice about the proper procedure for securing employment.

Teckla's attitude towards work - and life in general is best shown by a favorite expression of hers: "I don't let it get me down!" And when anyone worries about work piling up, she remarks casually, "You just can't take it, eh?"

At lunch time, or when work becomes slack for a moment or two, her corner of the office is the gathering place for the other employees, who know that she usually has a good joke to tell before the time arrives for work to be resumed.

People who knew her during the days she lived with Ted say she seems much happier now, than at that time.

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But in spite of her care-free disposition, Teckla says:

"I do wish times would get better, so I could get a good job in private industry. WPA is so uncertain, I want something with a future.

"Down on Palmetto Row some stenographers are only getting seven dollars a week. I can't live on that, I want a job bringing in at least a hundred bucks a month.

"You see, I have to look ahead. I don't expect I'll ever marry again, because not many men want to be saddled with a ready-made family. I don't know how Pop's going to leave

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his money, but I'm sure that if I peg out, he'll look out for the kids, and that means a lot to me, because I can't get insurance on account of my bad heart.

"Pop says he's going to send then both to college. I don't think Buddy will want to go because all he talks about is the sea. Leila wants to be a nurse. But she likes her books right now better than I ever did, so she may want to go for a year or two.

"Believe me, though, I wouldn't have gone to college if you had paid me a million dollars. Not me!"

But even though she is not a student, Teckla likes to read, and subscribes to a club of popular magazines, which supply her with the "Pictorial Review," "Ladies Home Journal," and "Good Housekeeping."

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"I can hardly wait to get the next installment of some of the stories," she says. "Mama reads them in the day. I read them at night. They sure are swell!" She will tell them to you in detail if you'll listen.

Teckla's mother is a gentle mannered, white haired, blue-eyed woman of fifty, from whom it is plain the little grand-daughter inherits her beauty - but not her mild manners, for Leila is as wild as her grandmother is gentle.

All the family love children, and the old Captain especially is planning big things for "those two," as he calls them. Realizing his own limited education he intends to send them to college. He and Mrs. Nielson are looking at pianos now so that Leila can begin music lessons.

The child loves music and rhythm, and sings and tap dances constantly. Golden-haired, blue-eyed, brimming over with laughter, everyone is attracted by her at first sight.

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Leila is a robust child, and shows the result of the well-rounded diet of fresh fruits, vegetables, eggs and milk which her grandfather supplies. Buddy, on the same diet, is far inferior to his sister physically. The delicate little boy catches every disease in the neighborhood, and in the past two years has had chicken pox, measles, whooping cough, and a severe attack of mastoids. At Christmas he put his firecrackers on the stove to get "nice and hot," 12 and has had two fingers tied up ever since. Only last week he chopped the end off of one of the unwounded fingers with a hatchet, and had to be taken to the hospital for treatment.

But nothing like that ever happens to lucky little Leila.

In spite of his frailness (which Teckla says he will outgrow) in face and figure Buddy is the Captain in miniature as they go hand and hand to the wharf on Saturday mornings. Me, too, is planning at this early age to "follow the sea."

Sometimes Granddad takes him off for an entire day on the freight boat. Night brings them home tired, grimy and happy, ready to fall into bed together after a hearty supper.

Teckla gets up in the mornings and cooks the family breakfast, for Mrs. Nielson has not been well lately, and so her daughter insists on her staying in bed until the children are out of the way and the house quiets down. After eating a big bowl of hot cereal and milk, an egg and plenty of bread and butter, Leila and Buddy trot off of school, carrying their brightly-colored tin lunchboxes, in which Teckla has packed an apple and a handful of cookies. Each has a nickle for chocolate milk. Leila always has her money safe at lunch time, but little Buddy usually manages to lose his, or gives it away to some poor child.

While the children are at school, Teckla and her 13 sister Freida at their respective offices, Mrs. Nielson tidies the house, washes up the breakfast dishes, and starts the wholesome dinner, which is served on the arrival of the children around one thirty. This meal usually consists of a meat of some sort - fish is a favorite dish in the family-rice, several kinds of

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vegetables, bread and butter, milk for the children; coffee for the adults. No sweet is ever served at this meal on week-days.

On Sunday Teckla cooks the dinner, and so gives her mother a rest. Chicken and dumplings usually forms the main dish, and psuteiis often served for dessert. In summer they sometimes have ice-cream and cake.

Once a week a colored girl comes in to help clean house, and do the scrubbing, for which they pay her fifty cents, and give her a heaping plate of the family dinner.

Besides cooking breakfast Teckla does the marketing. She gets the best values for her money, for she is a thrifty shopper. Not for her is the lazy telephone order, and each fish or cut of beef is carefully prodded for proof of its freshness or tenderness before the purchase is finally made. Lettuce must be crisp, bananas firm and green, before they can find their way into her market basket.

"Freida doesn't like housework," said Teckla," so she isn't much of a help around the house. She's a clerk at the telephone company - has been with them for a long time.

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Freida started off as a telephone operator, and worked up to a clerical position. She gets seventy-five dollars a month, has a day off each week and two weeks' vacation in summer.

"But I'll tell the world she's a lot different from what I am. She worries all the time about her work. I tell her not to let it git her goat, but sometimes she gets right much whipped down.

"It's a good thing, though, that she's on the clerical force now instead of at the switchboard, because she has some kind of chronic ear trouble and is getting pretty deaf. The doctor says he's done all he can, and it can't be cured. When she has a cold, for instance, all the discharge istthrough her ear, instead of through her nostrils, and it makes her awfully sick.

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"Freida is literary, like Mama's sister, Graetchen. You ought to see the high-brow books that gal reads. But she doesn't care a thing about stepping out with men. It's funny, too, because most people think she's pretty. I know she's got me beat a mile. And does that girl like to dress!"

But Crystal is Pop's favorite daughter. Married to a husky young insurance collector of Italian parentage. Crystal is "expecting" in the spring, and the Captain is as excited as the father-to-be.

"If it's a boy it's going to be named for Pop," said Teckla," and then Leila and Buddy'd noses will sure be out of joint.

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"Every time that girl comes to the house," she continued, "Dad gives her something. Last week he gave her five dollars, just for going on an errand to the bank. I go all over the city for him, and he never gives me anything. It sure makes me mad."

But she laughed when she said it, for she knows she has no need to be jealous of her sister, for the Captain is always doing something for his grandchildren. Last summer he took them both for a two weeks' stay in the mountains of North Carolina, so that Teckla could take her much needed vacation alone, and whenever they need anything which she cannot afford to give them, Pop cheerfully supplies the necessary funds.

Due to the Captain's insistence that all members of the family contribute their share toward the household expenses, it is possible for the Nielsons to live well, dress well, have good food, and still, save a little for emergencies. While Teckla uses most of her eighty dollars for board, clothing, doctors bills (usually for Buddy), and other incidental expenses, The Captain insists that she put five dollars in the bank each pay day. She also has a Christmas Saving Club for the children, and banks the check for them each year.

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Speaking of family finances, Teckla says “the Old Man is very tightmouth.” She knows little about his business affairs. She thinks, though, that he has a good many irons in the fire, 16 for although he never says anything definite, now and then he will drop a hint:

“Teckla, I’ve got half a dozen tickets on the ferry-boat. Dress the kids, and you and your mother take them for a trip around the harbor.”

“I think he owns a share in that business,” she says.

Last year for the first time in Teckla’s memory the Captain was ill, the victim of a slight stroke of paralysis.

“Daughter,” he said one day, when he was convalescing, “go down to Blank Bank, open my private security box, and clip the coupons on the bonds for me.”

That was the first time, Teckla says, she even knew he had any bonds to clip.

The Nielsons have been living in their present home for several years now. Teckla says the Captain paid for it in cash, and although he has had several offers which would yield a handsome profit on the investment, he says he “doesn’t care to sell.” As the house is located in one of the best residential sections of the city, where real estate values are still rising, the shrewd old man realizes that he can well, afford to hold the property.

Teckla’s home to a comfortable two story brick dwelling of six rooms and bath, set well back from the street with a wide flower-bordered lawn in front, which serves as a 17 playground for Leila and Buddy. A giant umbrella tree shades the yard, from which the two youngsters escape at every opportunity - Leila to visit her small schoolmates; Buddy to run off to the wharf in search of Granddad.

On the hardwood floor of the seldom-used parlor is a dark brown velvet artsquare, matching in color the over-stuffed sofa and chairs. A small modern secretary in walnut

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finish holds some of Freida's books. On a drop-leaf table is a large gold-framed, tinted photograph of Leila in a fluffy white dress, with a big blue bow on her hair; while on the mantle between two antique china vases is one of Buddy in a sailor suit. The only wall decoration is a floral watercooler in an old gold-leaf frame, which hangs on the front wall above a large victrola, between the tall, lace-curtained windows.

But the dining room is the heart of the household. About its round oak table, almost covered by a large lace centerpiece, the family gathers in the evenings to sew, read, or play cards. Here the children do their home work, which Teckla says consists mostly of coloring picture books according to some "new fangled" system of teaching which she does not understand.

"It certainly teaches them to read fast, though," she concedes.

There is an open fireplace in the dining room around which they sit when company comes, to partake of the 18 coffee and cake, or the glass of wine and fruitcake, always so hospitably proffered by the ladies of the household. And hers, too, is the radio, and an invitingly shabby couch for rest and naps.

The old Captain, however, regards it as a personal insult if guests are taken into the orderly, well furnished parlor, instead of being brought into the cluttered, shabby dining room.

"What's good enough for us is good enough for our company," he growls.

But the pride of the family is a strictly modern, up-to-date bathroom, which has recently replaced the antiquated relic of early plumbing days. The pale blue walls are washable; floor and wainscoting are of shining tile; the porcelain tub is built-in; and a blue curtained shower has been installed for the shower addicts of the family.

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Just outside the bathroom door is a newly built-in linen closet, which Mrs. Nielson opens with pride to show the piles of snowy linens, with their wide borders of hand-knit or crocheted lace, and the hand embroidered towels and bedspreads on which she loves to work while resting from more strenuous duties.

Teckla is beginning to take an interest in hand work, and has just completed a crocketed bedspread, for which 19 her mother is now netting the fringe.

A roomy garage at the end of the driveway houses the three family cars. Pop has a new light car of popular make; Teckla and Mrs. Nielson have a good second hand machine to take the children driving when Pop's car is in use; and for Teckla to go to and from work in. The automobile is really Mrs. Nielson's but Teckla does the driving. Freida's is a roadster of a more expensive type, equipped with heater, radio, and all the up-to-date gadgets.

Often on Sunday mornings Teckla rises at daybreak to fry chicken (which despising the slower process of picking, she impatiently skins), and make the macaroni pie and tomato pileau without which no Old Town picnic dinner is complete. Then the whole family pile into cars, and off they go to spend the day at one of the nearby beaches in the summer, or more distant points in the winter.

The Nielsons are a clannish family, and seldom is an out-sider invited to share their Sunday jaunts. Since they are Lutherans the children usually go to Lutheran sabbath school when in the city, and the adults attend the morning service, but take no active part in church work.

Far from straight-laced in her attitude towards amusements and Sunday observance, Teckla says she steps out every chance she gets, regardless of the day.

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"The better the day, the better the deed," she observes airily, rapidly adding a row of figures, and setting down the total in neat red figures at the bottom of the column.

Like many tall, slender girls she is a good dancer, and is never at a loss for partners, for men respond to her ready wit and the appeal in her blue eyes.

She enjoys a bridge game, too, and belongs to a club composed of eight young women, who meet at each other's homes one evening each week. Lavish refreshments are served, and Teckla says they talk and eat more than they play. She herself is a good player, and has many prizes which she shows with pride, and says:

"I put them in my cedar chest and give them away again. They come in useful on birthdays and Christmas.

When it is Teckla's turn to entertain the club, Crystal comes to the house and prepares a special Italian dish from a recipe which has been in her husband's family for several generations. While the main ingredients are quite ordinary - spaghetti, tomatoes, cheese and tiny meat balls- the secret lies in the preparation of the sauce, which takes all day to cook, and when finished is a culinary masterpiece.

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Teckla, says "Pop is a real sport." He plays cards, shoots crap, loves a good joke-any kind. He is regarded by his friends as a "jolly, good fellow," and is very much in demand at their gatherings. Hunting is his favorite sport, however, and each season see the Nielson table loaded with marsh-hen, duck, or venison.

Pop takes an interest in politics, both local and national. He is thought by Teckla to have "quite a bit of pull" in certain quarters, and is always well informed on political matters. He and his family always vote the Democratic ticket.

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Teckla herself is an enthusiastic Roosevelt fan, and an ardent advocate of the New Deal. She attends the President's Birthday Ball each year, giving her donation ungrudgingly to help the crippled children of the nation. Perhaps the secret of her sympathy may be found in her statement:

"Buddy was club-footed when he was a baby, but he's been wearing shoes specially built for him several years now, and the bone specialist says he's sure he'll be all right before long. I hope so, anyhow, for those specially made shoes cost plenty; and bone doctors charge plenty, too!"

All the Nielsons love to dress, and dress well, with the exception of the Captain, who seldom lays aside the hunting costume in which, however, he looks his best. Teckla's habit is to buy a suit one year, a coat the next. C10 - 1/31/41 - S.C.

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She is always the first of the office crowd to appear in a new spring hat, and in the fall is the first of the girls to put away her summer clothes and flaunt a new fall outfit.

The day's work done, she sweeps all uncompleted business into her desk drawer with one swift movement of her hand, and rising, places a nifty "pill box" with flying veil at a precarious angle on her newly set blond permanent, pulls on her fashionable silk and leather gloves, covers up the typewriter, and breezes out. C10 - 1/31/41 - S.C.